

The Franciscan Consciousness of St. Anthony of Padua

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La coscienza minoritica di Antonio di Padova
di fronte all'Europa del suo tempo

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I would like to preface what I am about to say by noting that it may be rejected by many or at least give rise to some doubts. Be that as it may, my presentation is the result of careful reflection on the *Sermons* of Anthony of Padua and especially on his Christian and Franciscan consciousness.¹

Years ago in *Il Santo* I made some observations concerning Anthony's preaching style and technique. I stressed that his sermons, rather than being aimed at the people, were addressed to a relatively small community, or at any rate one that was fairly well educated.² What we have in the Antonian corpus is a collection of sermons that are not 'popular' but meant either for friars or the clergy. What I am about to explain is the result of those considerations plus others that came to me later as I was studying Francis of Assisi and Franciscan beginnings. All of this will appear in one of my books that is soon to be published.³

1. Anthony the Preacher and His Audience

First of all, I should point out that the style of preaching found in the sermons of Anthony of Padua is *secundum modum praedicandi* as opposed to *secundum modum concionandi*. This famous distinction of Thomas of Spalato

¹ See S. Antonii Patavini, O.Min., doctoris evangelici. *Sermones dominicales et festivi ad fidem codicum recogniti*. I-III, Padua 1979.

² See R. Manselli, S. Antonio di Padova e la prima predicazione francescana, in *Il Santo* 8 (1968), pp. 2-19.

³ See R. Manselli, San Francesco, 2nd revised edition, Rome 1981; idem, *Nos qui cum eo fuimus. Contributo alla questione francescana*, Rome 1980; idem, *I primi cento anni di storia francescana*, Rome 1982.

is well-known to you scholars here, and so there is no need to dwell on it.⁴ This particular style of preaching is quite unlike what Francis had in mind for his followers, or at any rate it is not intended for the masses. Who, then, were these sermons intended for?

Let me say at once and without hesitation that they were not, in my opinion, addressed to the Friars Minor. The basic facts are these. First of all, Francis of Assisi is never mentioned by name. It is extraordinary, if not incredible, that the founder of the order and model of the friars not be remembered with some expression of respect. This is the man who had authorized Anthony to teach theology—granted, with certain conditions. Let us not forget that Francis had called Anthony “my bishop.”⁵ Can it be that he left no impression in Anthony’s mind? Think of Anthony’s contemporaries, for example Jacques de Vitry, who in his *Sermones ad Fratres Minores* could not help but remind the brothers of their master and founder.⁶

And so I think it is at least unusual that Francis is not given his due place. I know at this point you are silently thinking to yourselves that this is an argument from silence and hence proves nothing. Let me say that in that case we are obliged to explain the reason for this silence. If Anthony were some minor figure in Franciscan history or a simple friar, we could imagine that he was absent-minded or forgetful. (Strange, however, that this is not the case in other sermons we have from that same time!) No, this is evidently not the case with Anthony. Nor does his silence extend only to irrelevant aspects or to a single facet of the Franciscan ideal; Anthony is silent about everything.

Thus, on the level of methodology, we cannot use the argument from silence. The conclusions I have reached are based on a comprehensive study of Anthony’s personality and ideas as expressed in the Sermons. What we have before us is the mentality of a relevant figure, not someone who has failed to mention one or the other aspects of the Franciscan ideal due to neglect or casual omission. The problem arises, not because we have taken note of Anthony’s silence, but because we have done a comprehensive

⁴ See L. Lemmens, *Testimonia minora saeculi XIII de S. Francisco*, in *Collectanea Philosophico-Theologica* III, Quaracchi 1926, p. 10.

⁵ Francis’s letter to Anthony can be found in the critical edition of K. Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi*. Grottaferrata 1976 (*Spicilegium Bonaventurianum* XIII), pp. 147-54.

⁶ See. H. Felder, *Jacobi Vitriacensis episcopi et cardinalis, 1180-1240, Sermones ad Fratres Minores duo*. Rome 1903 (*Spicilegium Franciscanum*, 5).

rethinking of the entire dominicales. This is particularly true if, as many believe, these represent a complete opus and are addressed to ecclesiastics.⁷

To begin, let me draw your attention to the fact that the Anthony whom Francis authorized to teach theology to the brothers, "as long as you do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind, as contained in the Rule,"⁸ apparently taught everything. Yet he did not touch on a single point related to the Rule or Franciscan spirituality. This is a complete contradiction to Francis's formal instructions; in fact, as we have already noted, Anthony did not mention him even in passing.

But there is, I think, something even more important than his silence about Francis. If we examine the idea of poverty in these sermons, we certainly find evidence of its importance, that it is essential for salvation. But we search in vain for that breath of deep and intimate love that pervades Franciscan writing on poverty, from the *Sacrum commercium* and its ideals of chivalry to the *Canticum pauperis pro dilecto* and other literature on poverty.⁹ To anticipate my conclusion, I would even say that poverty— notwithstanding the tribute paid it—is understood more in polemic terms than as a deep and intimate clinging motivated by love. The concept of poverty is not even theologized or turned into a problem for moral and ascetical theology, as we find in Alexander of Hales, who is almost a contemporary.¹⁰

There is a third point. This series of sermons also lacks another basic Franciscan trait: the exhortation to peace. We know that in Veneto conflicts were heating up between Ezzelino, whose star was on the rise, and the factions that divided the cities. If the presently accepted date is correct and these sermons were written after the civil strife in Padua, we are again left puzzled, especially since in the *Sermones* Anthony explicitly states that the affairs of the city are foreign to him.¹¹

⁷ We are referring to the many works on the sermons as a source for the teachings of Anthony of Padua. Among these is the comprehensive volume, *S. Antonio dottore della Chiesa*, Rome 1948, with its many and varied contributions. Other scholars have picked up on the topics dealt with there. Their work can be found in the fine review *Il Santo*.

⁸ See n. 5.

⁹ See *Sacrum commercium beati Francisci cum domina paupertate*, Quaracchi 1929; *Canticum pauperis pro dilecto fr. Joannis Peckam*, Quaracchi 1949 (*Bibliotheca Franciscana Ascetica Medii Aevi*, IV).

¹⁰ Alexander Hales must be regarded as the mind behind the *Expositio quatuor magistrarorum*, critical edition by L. Oliger, Rome 1950. It goes without saying that Alexander of Hales also needs to be studied from a historical point of view, as we are doing for Anthony relative to his pre-Franciscan period.

¹¹ See R. Manselli, Padova e S. Antonio, in *Storia e cultura al Santo*, ed. A. Poppi, Vicenza 1976, pp. 3-14. For Anthony's attitude toward the affairs of the city, see the contribution by G.

2. Anthony the Theologian and the Crisis of the Clergy

Examining these sermons as a whole, we find them to be theologically based and marked by an awareness of one of the problems facing the church at the time. This is expressed in a series of harsh criticisms, climaxing with the famous image of the sow and her piglets.¹² It is quite fitting and surely. But which of them could be called starting points for a Franciscan theology strictly so-called?

When Alexander of Hales became a friar in Paris, he brought with him all the baggage of Parisian theology into which he inserted Franciscan spirituality. Similarly, Anthony remained the theologian who had received his formation in Coimbra; he could not simply discard all this. But where is the injection of Franciscan spirituality? This is the crucial point of my presentation, for it may seem that I have completely forgotten about my initial topic. For this reason I must tell you what I think these sermons are and how, in their own way, they express Anthony's Franciscan consciousness. My point of view is completely different, indeed the opposite, from that which prevails.

Based on what I have said so far, I think we can unequivocally conclude that these *sermones* were written by Anthony while he was a theologian and canon in Coimbra. They are addressed to the world in which he lived, although (and this is a hypothesis) they were probably revised at the time when, as we know from other sources, he collected his sermons.¹³ In other words, they are sermons written by a canon, meant for the clergy, prepared in Portugal and revised in Italy. Most important of all, they are expressions of deep religious unrest and existential discontent. Here is an man who from his own theological consciousness derived the premises for a penetrating critique of the church and its need for renewal. As I will explain presently, the basic reason for Anthony's acceptance of Franciscanism is to be found in these sermons—as well as an explanation of his strange silence as a friar until, as we know, a series of largely random events forced him to reveal himself.¹⁴

Cracco in this same volume. His penetrating observations confirm that the Anthony of the *Sermones dominicales* was not yet part of Italian life.

¹² See the reference in n. 2 above.

¹³ See the reference in n. 1 above. I wish to dispel any doubts by saying that my presentation here refers to the *sermones dominicales*. Those for feasts break off before the month of October and so are of no help in clarifying Anthony's view of Francis. What is more, their content is not as useful for a study of Anthony's mentality and spirituality.

¹⁴ For the legends *Assidua* and *Benignitas*, see L. de Kerval, *Sancti Antonii de Padua Vitae duae quarum altera hucusque inedita...* Paris 1904 (*Collection d'Etudes et de documents*, V); for the *Assidua* see also the most recent critical edition by V. Gambos, Padua 1981.

The first point I want to emphasize is this. Anthony was led to accept the religious ideal of Francis, not because of its theological importance, but because it answered the spiritual needs posed by his theology. To remain a canon in Coimbra would mean to risk becoming part of a clerical society, whose shortcomings and sins he understood well and did not wish to share. We are reminded that in Portugal, as well as in many other parts of Europe, there were individuals who were dissatisfied with the spiritual situation in their local churches. They were waiting for renewal to come from somewhere; they were predicting some *quid novi* to resolve their questions of conscience. Let me recall the concerns of Jacques de Vitry, more or less expressed, though carefully and in literary language. A few years earlier a priest from Liège, Lambert-le-Bègue, in the face of a similar crisis was unsparing in his criticism of his confreres. Having compared the two, I believe that the canon from Lisbon was considerably harsher than the priest from Liège.¹⁵

The historical situation in Coimbra and Liège, which could be extended to include many other places, shows the existence of spiritual needs. I shall list them and explain them as I go along. The first and perhaps most important is the need for renewal of the clergy. This no longer means, as it did in the eleventh century, moral renewal within the ranks of the clergy itself. It means moral renewal that translates into pastoral action and is directed toward service of the faithful. The latter are no longer seen as needing to be, as it were, organized and indoctrinated by the clergy, but rather as the primary end goal of the clergy's pastoral care. I know I am using modern terminology, but I am fascinated by Chenu's description of the church as servant and poor.¹⁶

Here we touch upon the second point. Reform of the clergy must be concretely expressed in an asceticism that rejects worldliness. This includes rejection of power as social prestige and rejection of riches as defrauding the poor, who alone have a right to everything that goes beyond what is necessary. Seen from this angle, Anthony's polemic against the pride and wealth of the clergy takes on a special significance. It explains what I believe can be called his conversion.

By this time our canon is psychologically ready to become a friar. What becomes important as our third point is his sense of the need to share with others the results of his reflections and his new awareness of responsibility for others, especially the faithful. What Bernard of Clairvaux,

¹⁵ We are waiting for J. Goosens to publish the results of the thesis which he defended at the University of Louvain. It will be fundamental for an understanding of the unrest that pervaded various levels of the church at the end of the twelfth century.

¹⁶ See M. D. Chenu, *Pour une Église servante et pauvre*, Paris 1973.

a few decades earlier, regarded as the crux of monastic temptations becomes an inescapable demand that must be allowed full expression.¹⁷

All of this is Franciscan consciousness in the sense that Francis's conversion required him to solve a spiritual crisis so deep that it was not and did not remain individual. This crisis was felt more broadly, and in the case of Anthony of Padua, with unparalleled intensity. It may seem paradoxical that Franciscan consciousness should reach fruition through a spiritual crisis and in a society such as that found in late twelfth-century Europe. Beyond the splendor of court and castle, society was witnessing the growth of an unrest that expressed itself in heretical activity, especially at the popular level. Again we must point out that this was not simply a case of anti-Christian or anti-church sentiment, as some of its external aspects might lead us to believe. It was rather a search for that church and Christianity which could satisfy people's souls.¹⁸

3. Francis of Assisi and the Solution to the Crisis: Anthony the Friar

Francis's personal thirst for God, as it began to manifest itself more and more, was shared by a growing number of people. It is to his everlasting credit that he was able to find the answer, or at least one of the great answers, to his quest. His response met with the approval, not only of the humble but also the rich, powerful and learned—proof that it was valid not only at a popular level, but also as a historical response to the cry of the masses. Anthony of Padua's acceptance of Franciscanism meant his acceptance of the message in the manner and form in which it came to him. It was a message that could express as well as satisfy his spiritual needs.

At that point the canon turned friar had no reason to reject or renounce what he had already written. It was still valid, in fact it had come true in his new Franciscan vocation. While his writings retained their significance and served to confirm the inner drama that led him to the Friars Minor, they also affirmed what he had already felt as a canon and was at last able to express as a friar. Thus his crisis of conscience became, through what had been its written expression, the positive sign of his new certainty.

A careful study of the language of the *Sermones* may shed light on the possibility of successive revisions made by Anthony after he became a

¹⁷ See R. Manselli, *Studi sulle eresie*, 2nd enlarged edition, Rome 1975 (*Studi storici* 5), pp. 141-56: *Evervino di Steinfeld e san Bernardo di Clairvaux*.

¹⁸ See R. Morghen, *Medioevo cristiano*, Bari, Laterza, 1968 (5th edition), pp. 189-249: *L'eresia nel Medioevo*. See also n. 17 above.

Franciscan. But it strikes me as very important that he felt no need to rewrite his sermons. This means that he saw his previous writings as having permanent validity. In that case, as a Friar Minor it was his duty to state once again what had led him to pass *ad arctiorem statum*, as the monks or canonists would say.

Some may think that what I have said will diminish Anthony's greatness. Or perhaps it will give rise to a querelle at least as thorny as the one surrounding the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the *Rule of the Master*. In any case I want to dispel such doubts. What I have suggested so far points to the anguish of soul in a great man, as Anthony certainly was. We have seen his inner depth and his struggles with conscience while a canon in Coimbra. We have seen how he responded by keeping his sermons even after he became a Franciscan and patterned his life after the way laid down by the founder. None of this means that he was passive or self-satisfied. Rather it was his reaffirmation of a program of reform and renewal, of dedication to pastoral activity and the care of souls. Only a Friar Minor could accomplish this in the Europe that was reawakening thanks to the example of Francis of Assisi and the word of his brothers, including Anthony of Lisbon, now the saint of Padua.¹⁹

¹⁹ Those who still wish to say that the *sermões dominicales* were written by Anthony after he became a friar (which frankly I think is hard to maintain) have not, in any case, stressed the fact that the spirituality and theology expressed in them is not Franciscan. It remains that of Anthony's early formation, in other words, while he was a canon. As far as we can tell, nothing was added during his years in the order. Moreover, from whom and where could Anthony have pursued his theological studies as a Friar Minor? If there were other masters, why would Anthony have suggested to Francis that he teach theology? As for Francis's admonition to Anthony—does it also spring from his concern that Anthony's theological formation, which was prior to his entrance into the order and foreign to its spirituality, might somehow disturb the spirituality that Francis was trying to spread in the church? I think this is an open question and one that should be discussed.